

John Ashbery Interview with J. P. O'Malley

Could you talk about the poem "What is Poetry?" from your collection *Houseboat Days*?

Like most poets, I'm constantly being asked the question: what is poetry. And of course there's no real answer. Like the famous definition of pornography, you know it when you see it. Trivia from daily life may or may not be part of it. The first line of that poem is one possible answer: "The medieval town/ with frieze/ of boy scouts from Nagoya?" That is actually a conflation of two remote memories, the first being when I was visiting the city of Chester once with a friend. We were between trains and actually running around the ramparts, and collided with a troop of Italian boy scouts. And then another time in the elevator of the Empire State Building there was a bunch of Japanese boy scouts, who had the name Nagoya on their uniforms. For some reason I began to think of these things when I thought of the question: what is poetry? It's perhaps meant to imply that poetry can be just about anything the poet happens upon when trying to write.

The poem "More Reluctant" from your latest collection, begins "It's time for a little chamber music/ of Arensky or Borodin, something minor and enduring." Could you speak about the importance that you place in the music of your poems?

I have a great love of 19th century Russian composers, such as Arensky and Glazunov. (In my first book there's a poem called "Glazunoviana.") These minor figures I find very moving. I've always been envious of composers because they have the ability that poets will never have of expressing themselves without being pinned down to one particular meaning, as language is. After listening to a piece of music we often feel a sense of satisfaction and understanding. Poetry aims for this as well, but it's limited by what the words mean, whereas in music, the message is exact and intelligible but without being paraphrasable like language. Music is also something that has to be experienced over a period of time, unlike a painting. Poetry requires time but somehow you look at it, as you can with a work of art, and kind of get it, before you finish reading it.

Has there ever been a point when you thought the reader is not going to understand this? I'm thinking of your second and challenging collection *The Tennis court oath*. When you were writing this, did you imagine yourself in the readers' shoes?

Since my first book went nowhere, I was really disappointed and decided to write in a different, experimental way. But what could that be? Did I expect people to read those poems? Well, I didn't because I thought nobody would publish them. On the one hand I have always felt the most important thing that a writer should do is to write something that people will understand. But I also want to write poetry that expresses my usually tangled thoughts without condescending to a reader. How is it possible to have both of these things happen? I sort of hope they somehow will. But I can't be the judge of whether they do or not.

You once wrote that "I want to stretch the bond between language and communication but not to sever it". Could you explain what you meant by this?

The bond between language and communication, which some would say is non-existent because they are the same thing, is something that preoccupies me. Language has its own meaning, which is separate from meaning as communication, or so it seems to me.

For example, the language that we hear in dreams is very important to me. I wake up with these words that have just been spoken, and they somehow have a meaning beyond what is possible, even beyond expression. So what is that? It's almost like the meaning of music. It's a sort of super meaning that I don't know much about except that it constantly attracts me and makes me want to include it in my poems.

Could you speak about the use of clichés in your poetry?

I'm attracted to well-worn clichéd language that has been used for ages, when people are trying to express something that is really important to them, and thus it ends up sounding banal, which for me is somehow holy because this speech has served so many times for so many people at important moments in their lives.

Can you tell me about when you first began to become interested in Surrealism and how it changed your perception of the world, or how you related ideas to language, or aesthetics to language?

Yes, when I was nine years old, Life magazine in one of their first issues had an article on a big show of Dada and Surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art. I had never seen anything like those paintings. I immediately fell in love with them and thought that when I grew up I would be a Surrealist. Of course I hadn't read any Surrealist literature at that time, but I was ready for it when I encountered it. With a few exceptions though, the actual literature of Surrealism has been less meaningful to me than the films and paintings it inspired.

What do you take from the Surrealists?

The idea is that you can use the material of dreams and the unconscious: it's something that has stayed with me ever since. But I should point out that I don't believe in completely abandoning the conscious, as, say, Breton would have insisted. Since we do actually use our conscious minds quite consciously all the time, why not give them a voice in what we are creating.

Could you speak about the movement known as 'The New York School of poets'? Friends of yours like Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, and others.

Well, Kenneth was the first one of us to go to France, on a Fulbright fellowship. He spread the word when he came back about writers we had never read, and couldn't read as yet in French, people like Raymond Roussel. But we never saw ourselves as being a movement, just a group of miscellaneous poets who happened to know one another. Our poetry was obviously not what was considered poetry in those days, so we read each other's work and got together and discussed it. The art dealer who published our first pamphlets decided on the term New York school of poets, thinking that the prestige of the New York school of painters would somehow rub off on us. If someone wanted to call us that, fine, but it becomes restrictive after a while, and people begin to construe it as sort of French, frivolous, involved with word play and so on. And so it gets left at that.

Aesthetics and art has always been a huge influence on your work, particularly on a collection like *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Could you speak about the differences you see between painting and poetry?

You look at a painting and say, oh there it is: I see it and I get it. But in poetry you have to follow, and really pay close attention. I've just remembered that you asked me earlier about the Wallace Stevens line "The poem must resist the intelligence/ almost successfully?". What Stevens was saying, actually, was that the poem must not resist the intelligence. But he throws the reader off with this one word, almost.

The reader thinks, oh, he's saying the poem must not be understandable, it must resist the intelligence, what kind of bullshit is that? It's because they are not paying attention. Poetry, especially for somebody like Wallace Stevens, deals in very fine degrees of meaning and shading, which are there if you look for them and absorb them.

Much has been made by many critics and readers alike of the term "you" or "we" in your poetry. Your poems never seem to really give away who that "you" or "we" is that you are writing about. Could you speak specifically about this shifting between voices or pronouns, in the narratives of your poems?

Yes, those have caused a great deal of trouble from day one. It must be that I "hear voices" when I'm writing, but also I think because I've never had a very strong sense of my own self, and therefore to have other voices cropping up and speaking their mind in my poetry always seemed perfectly natural. I remember when I was writing plays the idea of writing dialogue attracted me very much because I could imagine what other people would say more easily than what I myself might say.

One thing that seems to get under people's skin is my frequent use of the word "it", without any particular attribution, and that again was something that I guess came naturally to me, maybe from seeing so much abstract art. "It" is something that's both vague and specific, and it doesn't need to be called anything other than it, which is what it is.

When you began writing poetry would you agree that you were very sceptical of what had traditionally been the function of the lyric poem: capturing a moment in time?

When I first wrote poetry in my teens, I imitated 19th century poems, with rhyme and meter and all those wonderful things, and those poems were probably attempts to capture a moment in time. But I guess as I grew older the idea of flux supplanted that of static reflection.

When you finish a poem do you believe you have put order into the chaotic world that random language without a form is?

Well, I wish. I'm not sure poetry can do that. I think I've always proceeded on the assumption that it can, but it's asking a lot from it to make ordered sense of the world, especially the one that we happen to be living in at the moment. I suppose that might actually have been the original impetus: to put some sort of order into the chaos that random language is, but without sacrificing the randomness, because that itself is essential to communication.

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